



## BOOK REVIEWS

Zsigmond király Sienában [King Sigismund in Siena].

By Péter E. Kovács. Budapest: Corvina Kiadó, 2014. 308 pp.

With his 2008 book *Hétköznapi élet Mátyás király korában* [Everyday life in the time of King Mátyás], Péter E. Kovács won himself the title of the “new Antal Szerb,” a moniker on which he is clearly playing a bit in the book under review. This play is a two-sided coin. Szerb’s style, which was aimed at an audience of lay readers (I am thinking perhaps first and foremost of his *A világirodalom története* [The history of world literature], [1941]), was indeed more accessible to wide readership than most traditional scholarly literary histories. However, it did not win the admiration of most of the scholarly community precisely because of the subjectivity of Szerb’s assessments and the many humorous but misleading pronouncements, such as his whimsical remark, “Klió nem kilóra mér,” which might be translated into English as “Clio does not measure by the kilo.” Furthermore, E. Kovács also seems to aspire to don Szerb’s laurels as a belle-lettrist, an ambition palpable both in his style and his literary allusions, as I explain below.

The book examines the 288 days that King Sigismund of Luxemburg spent in Siena between July 1432 and April 1433. E. Kovács draws on a wide, almost unparalleled array of source materials and offers daring theories, and he always keeps historical authenticity (credibility) in the foreground, taking care to name his sources specifically and precisely. His sources include chronicles, such as the Chronicle of Eberhard Windecke (the so-called Bern chronicle) and the chronicle of Enguerrand de Monstrelet. Given the absence of archival resources, E. Kovács uses works of literature, such as the romance by Eneas Silvius Piccolomini (the letter Pope Pius II) and the poems of Antonio Beccadelli. At the same time, E. Kovács keeps repeating that his work is impossible, nonsensical (see, for instance, p.46) and that archival research of a historian is frequently as fictive as any novel. Perhaps the most striking example is when E. Kovács cites the opening speech given at a 2014 book fair by contemporary Hungarian novelist György Spiró (p.159).

The book consists of ten chapters which diverge considerably both in their length and worth. They do have at least one thing in common. Namely, they all present new information concerning the history of the mentality, culture,

and literature of the time and place under discussion. The chapters contain a wealth of information concerning the details of Sigismund's trip to Rome, though they do not always draw on the newest secondary literature (for instance some of the works of Ágnes Máté), which is surprising simply because E. Kovács emphasizes his sincere interest in the subject (p.13, 17–28). Just to cite two examples, one might think of the publication by A. Sottili of text from the account given by Johannes Roth (Pirckheimer Jahrbuch 15/16 [2000]) or A. T. Hack's publication of text from a writing by an anonymous author on the participants in the journey (Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur Beiheft 7 [2007]). The best parts of the texts are the passages in which E. Kovács immerses himself in the era. His descriptions become very evocative and he does not digress or mention less pertinent associations, for instance in his description of the reception in Siena (pp.26–27, 58–60) or his presentation of the various accommodations (pp.63–72). It is certainly worth noting that the array of appendices (which meet high scholarly standards) is impressive and praiseworthy. It would also have been useful to have a proper index in order to make the work more easily accessible, though perhaps this would have made it too long.

Following a description of the arrival, the reader is given a glimpse into everyday life in Siena. How much did things cost? Who slept where, and on what? What did they eat? How did they pass the time? What did an average day consist of for a king? How much did the revels in Siena cost? E. Kovács offers answers to these and other questions. The book is indeed a micro-historical endeavor, and it includes shorter histories, for instance on Miklós Várdai or on Sigismund's love life. Indeed, the latter is a recurring motif, and the longest chapter, the title of which is revealing ("Fruit-picking, Sailing, Horseback Riding"), is devoted to this topic. The question of love comes up not only with regards to Sigismund's fidelity, but also in connection with the most famous love affair of this period. I am thinking of the main characters, Euryalus and Lucretia, of the Piccolomini's famous 1444 romance, *The Tale of Two Lovers*. The epistolary novel is interesting to a Hungarian readership in part because one of Lucretia's suitors is Hungarian. The romance was translated into Hungarian relatively early on by Pataki Névtelen (Anonymous Pataki). It continues to hold the attention of literary historians today, who wonder if perhaps it was translated by Hungarian poet Bálint Balassi. E. Kovács does not reach any conclusion with regards to this question, but he does try to identify the historical figures on whom the characters may have been based, drawing on documents that had not previously

been used and also works of secondary literature, though not the most recent works of secondary literature (pp.150–51). Certainly literary historians will find a great many things of interest in this book, for which one can only be grateful. The other topic which comes up regularly is the financial circumstances of the various people in Siena, the conflicts that were caused by financial concerns, and the ways in which these conflicts were addressed. The reader learns, for example, that since the soldiers received only modest wages, they were not able to go to brothels often enough. The locals, however, nonetheless watched the successful courtships of the foreigners with envy. E. Kovács contends that the successes of the Hungarian soldiers with Italian women were repaid in the 1960s and 1970s, when Italian tourists in Hungary enjoyed great popularity among Hungarian women. E. Kovács often seems to be projecting phenomena from our era onto earlier eras, which perhaps gives a lay reader a perspective from which to interpret the events, but it is hardly an approach to be adopted by a serious historian, and indeed it is often a bit irritating. Just to mention a few examples, I do not think E. Kovács's contention that we should regard the trumpeter of Sigismund's day as the Miles Davis or Louis Armstrong of his era (p.112) helps the reader better understand the place and profession of the medieval trumpeter, must as I do not think E. Kovács's mention of Victoria Beckham as a modern, apparently archetypal example helps the reader better understand the popularity of athletic and wealthy men among women (p.145). These examples, which are intended to serve as illustrative parallels, do little more than distract the reader. They also set an expiration date for E. Kovács's narrative. What will the example of Victoria Beckham mean to a reader in 2050? Clearly very little. E. Kovács's effort to compensate for the somewhat dry nature of the topic with humorous remarks and parallels is perhaps understandable, but in my view he uses this approach with mixed success. Certainly his primary role model was the aforementioned Hungarian novelist and literary historian Antal Szerb (p.6, 36, 85, 138). Szerb's novel *Utas és holdvilág* (translated into English by Len Rix as *Journey by Moonlight*, [1937]) is set in Siena. The sentence "Cor tibi magis Siena pandit," which is an inscription on the Porta Camollia in Siena, is also cited by Szerb. E. Kovács paraphrases it and uses this paraphrase as the title of a chapter: "Bursam tuam magis Sigismundus pandit." This play on words is clever and pertinent, and it illustrates quite clearly how closely E. Kovács has focused on text in his (re)use of models. The switch (the substitution of financial concerns for matters of the heart) is just one example of the playful jibes that make the book a lively read. For the most part, E. Kovács identifies the figures on whose work he draws

(Hungarian novelist and poet Dezső Kosztolányi or Hungarian novelist Géza Ottlik, for instance), but sometimes the reader is left to figure this out for him or herself.

It is worth saying a few words about the appearance of the book as well. It contains strikingly beautiful illustrations which are closely tied to its contents. Unfortunately, it also contains numerous typos and editing and typesetting flaws, which are distracting at best, for instance “Jannus” instead of “Janus” (p.119). The name Euryalus is spelled correctly once or twice, and there are numerous typesetting mistakes and mistakes with word hyphenation at the end of a line (see for instance pp.167–68). These mistakes clearly reflect poorly on the editor and the publisher, not the author.

In summary, the book’s very striking exterior immediately captures the reader’s interest, as does the title. Fundamentally, it fulfills one’s expectations, if one can avoid asking the question, “who was this book written for.” It is exciting and offers many new insights, presented in a distinctive and at times amusing style.

Emőke Rita Szilágyi